FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
September 23, 2001

A DEFIANT HOPE
John M. Buchanan

"Trust what? Trust that God is Love and Life.... Trust that if God is anywhere, God is here, which means that there is no telling where God may turn up next.... If God is ever, God is now, in the in and out of breathing, the sound of footsteps on the stair, the smell of the rain, the touch of a hand. If God lives and loves ... it is in ourselves no less than everywhere else, in the godless no less than the godliest, in the dead no less than the living, because the end of life is no more likely to be the end of God's love that keeps it alive than it is of our love."

Frederick Buechner
The Eyes of the Heart
A Memoir of the Lost and Found

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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A DEFIANT HOPE
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN. PASTOR
FOUTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 91:1-16
Luke 16:19-31
Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-1-5

Dear God, we need a little light this morning. We come into your presence with hearts still heavy, spirits weary, and our minds exhausted from the constant weight of the grief in pictures, stories, personal anecdotes of tragedy. Startle us, O God, with your truth; come into our darkness with the light of your love and peace and hope in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

It is not realistic to expect this wound to heal quickly, although it is both understandable and almost second nature to us as Americans. We say it about almost everything that happens to us—"Let's put it behind us, get over it; let's get on with life"—as if we are psychologically unequipped to deal with unpleasantness, not to mention extraordinary tragedy, for very long.

It is not realistic to expect this wound to heal quickly. In an end essay in *Time* magazine's special issue last week with large dramatic photographs of the destruction of the World Trade Center, Lance Morrow argued that what we most need is not a quick fix. "For once," he wrote, "let's have no fatuous rhetoric about healing . . . as if the purpose in the midst of all this, were merely to make everyone feel better as quickly as possible. We shouldn't feel better." Of course, it is unhealthy to be obsessive about tragedy and suffering, to get stuck in the darkness. But it is also, I submit, equally unhealthy to try to leave the darkness too quickly.

To put this behind us, to get on with life, will allow us to avoid the difficult but necessary national process of introspection. There are serious questions now to be explored: questions of the critical balance between security and civil liberties, serious questions of why the people who did this did it. Their reasons may be evil and insane, but it is irresponsible not to probe and study and ask and listen until we know the reasons.

A friend sent an editorial from a Minneapolis paper that began with the writer's young daughter's haunting question: "Daddy, why do they hate us so?" Why, indeed? The most disturbing thing I read this week as the FBI and other law enforcement agencies began to assemble information was that the people who carried this out were not crazed, religiously brainwashed teenagers, eager to die so as to spend eternity in paradise with a harem of virgins. They seem to have been educated, middle-class, husbands and fathers, living and learning among us. The little girl's question is relevant. Why do they hate us? Why are they willing to die to hurt us? Again, I do not mean that the fault is ours, that, as

was suggested last week, we got what we deserved. We do need to do the difficult and painful work of learning what it is about us that elicits this depth of evil hatred.

I am grateful for our government's strong response. I'm glad to know that we have appropriated funds and deployed aircraft carriers and that President Bush articulated the nation's resolve to track down and find and bring to justice the people who did this and to build an international coalition to act in a sustained way against terrorism. But I also hope and pray for the additional moral courage and stamina for our president and his advisors to lead the nation in a reexamination of who we are and the role we play in this new global environment and how what we do or do not do ripples across nations and cultures in ways we do not intend but ways that can have terrible consequences.

In some newspapers, the process began last week. David Kennedy, Pulitzer Prize winning historian at Stanford, wrote in the *New York Times* that what happened was not "the kind of provocation that can be countered simply by mustering the nation's prodigious human, financial and industrial brawn" as we did in World War II. "Against our new foes our conventional arsenal is all but useless." Professor Kennedy invoked words of Abraham Lincoln, "as our case is new, we must think anew." It was from his annual message to Congress, December 1, 1862, at a very bleak moment in American history, when things looked very grim and the future looked ominously full of danger for the nation. Lincoln said:

> The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.

So, here we are. Twelve days after attacks on symbols of national identity, attacks that continue to ignite disastrous repercussions in our economy, our body politic. Wanting more than anything to heal and get on with life. Are there resources of faith for us in this moment?

I offer two. Let our oldest faith tradition expressed in the psalms be the foundation. In particular, Psalm 91, which we read together this morning.

> You who live in the shelter of the Most High . . .
> Will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress. . . ."
> For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
> and from the deadly pestilence. . . .
> You will not fear the terror of the night,
> or the arrow that flies by day.

Now the trouble with this psalm is that God does not, in fact, deliver us from the snare of the fowler, or from deadly pestilence, or from the terror of the night, or from a random act of terror at 8:45 on a beautiful Tuesday morning as you sit at your desk, take a sip of coffee, and turn on your computer on the eighty-seventh floor. The trouble with a surface

reading is that in spite of the lovely words, it doesn't always work. And to read it as a guarantee, a promise of safety, a magic amulet against tragedy, is to be regularly disillusioned. It is, of course, the fundamental theological dilemma: why evil in God's world? One time a group of Dominican theologians who loved the writing of the French existentialist Albert Camus tried to lure him back to faith. He said, " When I can make sense of a God who permitted babies to die, I could find the Christian scheme attractive" (quoted in Martin E. Marty, *A Cry of Absence*, p. 54).

The fact is that the psalmist knows that faith in God is no guarantee that evil will be avoided. The fact is that most of the psalms were written out of historical situations that were tragic and seemingly hopeless. The fact is what the psalm is about is in the next to last verse

> When they call to me, I will answer them;
> I will be with them in trouble.

What the psalm promises—and the very foundation of our faith—is the reality of God's love and presence in the midst of suffering and tragedy. What the psalm promises is an internal strength that allows God's children to keep on believing even in the midst of dreadful and seemingly hopeless circumstances. The fact is that faithfulness to God sometimes brings on difficulty and danger. Jesus' faithfulness led directly to the cross. When he claimed as his own the promise of his people's faith, when he quoted from the Psalter, it was as he hung on the cross.

> My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Psalm 22)

> Into your hand I commit my spirit (Psalm 31)

When he experienced intensely personal loss, Martin Marty wrote a remarkable book, *A Cry of Absence*, in which he observed that a smiley, superficial religiosity that says "Christ is the answer" without knowing what the question is trivializes both our suffering and the hope of faith. "Hope," Marty said, "real hope comes not in fat times but after the heart attack or while cells waste and friends withdraw because they are unable to bear the sight of the horror. There it is that nothing separates the creature from God" (p. 169).

Did you see the article last week about Mother Teresa, whose life is being scrutinized by the Vatican as part of the process leading to sainthood? What the researchers are discovering is a life of spiritual struggles and pain and a sense of God's abandonment—and her determination to go on serving the poor in spite of her doubts and fear. In her journal she was brutally honest: "Now, Jesus, she wrote, "they say that people in hell suffer eternal pain because of the loss of God. I feel just the terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing" (*Chicago Tribune* 16 September 2001). Hope is that person, that Mother Teresa founding the Missionaries of Charity to minister to the homeless and dying—and tirelessly expanding her order to 100 countries.

Let that be the foundation of faith's response to these events.

"Those who love me . . . I will be with them, with those in trouble."

Those words were echoed centuries after the Psalm 91 was written, echoed in a letter written by the apostle Paul, who would be martyred in Rome for his faith, to the Christians in Rome about to encounter unbelievable suffering and danger and death.

> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or destruction, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword. No. In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For nothing, in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God and Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Let that be the foundation on which we rest. And then let a wonderful story from our long ago history be its incarnation, its expression in an act of wonderfully defiant hopefulness.

The year is 597 B.C. The Babylonian army has surrounded and laid siege to Jerusalem. The Babylonian leader, Nebuchadnezzar, is angry. For the second time in a decade, Judah has revolted against Babylon, this time reaching out to Egypt for help. This time the Babylonians will not fail. Their objective is to rid the world of these people. They will reduce the people of Jerusalem to starvation and their monarchy and government to oblivion. If there are any alive after the inevitable surrender, they will be gathered and forcibly marched and dragged and driven back to Babylon. The Egyptians are not coming to rescue them. The Babylonians are irresistibly powerful. The Jerusalemites are weak, hungry, and utterly defenseless. There is no hope. And at just that moment, something defiantly hopeful happened.

A man by the man of Jeremiah, a prophet, has predicted all this and for his traitorous rhetoric has been put in jail. And at just that moment — with the Babylonians at the gate, the city about to fall, the people starving and dying—Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel shows up and asks Jeremiah to buy a field, to invest in real estate. It's slightly bizarre. The field by the way is in Anathoth, just northeast of the city wall. Which is to say that field is currently the site of an occupied army's encampment. Which is to say Jeremiah can't farm it, can't sell it, can't in any meaningful way own it because his nation and all its laws and social and economic and political infrastructure is about to collapse and disappear. And Jeremiah does the unthinkable, buys the field.

And then in a public display that is almost ceremonial, summons his friend Baruch and some other witnesses, seals the deal and transfers the deed in a very conspicuous manner, orders Baruch to put the deed in an earthen jar and bury it, store it for the long haul. Things are terrible and they are going to get worse and everybody knows it. And Jeremiah says:

> Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyard shall again be bought in the land.

That is hope, a defiant hope based on trust in God—from whom nothing will separate us. That is a resilient, defiant hopefulness in the midst of disaster that has characterized God's people down through the centuries.

In Babylonian exile
In times of Roman persecution
As the Vikings sacked the monasteries
As the fires of persecution burned the Middle Ages

A pastor in 1636, his town decimated by a thirty-year war, now flooded with refugees, 50 to 100 people dying every day, and he's the only minister left. And in the middle of that Martin Rinkart sits down and writes:

> Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,
> Who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices.

In Auschwitz, as Jews condemned to gas chambers observed the Sabbath.

A defiant hope—

Sitting in his Gestapo prison cell, waiting for his own execution, Dietrich Bonhoeffer remembered this exact story and wrote,

> Just as the Holy City is about to be destroyed—a sign and a pledge of better things to come, just when all seemed blackest. Thinking and acting for the coming generations but taking each day as it comes without fear and anxiety—that is the spirit in which we are forced to live in practice. It is not easy to be brave and to hold out but it is imperative. (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

And from our own history the week of December 7, 1941, the Session of this church met and sent a pastoral letter to every member of the congregation, which said,

> As Christian citizens we believe in the righteousness of our Nation's cause and pledge our support to it. We call upon all to give themselves for the long, grim days that are ahead. However, let there be no hysteria and no hatred. Let us also pray and think and plan for the new days which will follow the war.

In the darkest days, with the enemy at the gate, Jeremiah purchased property, invested in the future—an act of defiant hope.

What we dare to believe is that even in the darkness, when we can't see our way out or forward, God is with us.

What we dare to believe is that the most powerful reality in the world is the love of God.

What we dare to believe is that the last word spoken about each of us will not be a word of death, but a word of love, from which nothing can separate us.

What we dare to believe is that God is Lord of the future—that God calls us into the future in courage and hope.

We have lived through difficult and extraordinary days. After the shock and the intensity of last week, we began, this past week, to deal with it, think about it, and it has been a common experience among us to be down, depressed—in a dark valley.

A low point for me was Friday afternoon, after a long and tiring week.

Friday afternoon I had been invited to speak at a memorial service at Holy Name Cathedral for the United Airlines flight crews that were lost on September 11 on Flight 175 and Flight 93.

The service was sponsored by the Flight Attendants Organization and the Association of Airline Pilots. Holy Name Cathedral was full of United Airlines blue uniforms, men and woman, one week and three days after an act that had violently killed eighteen of their friends. It was a vulnerable congregation: proud professionals who were feeling understandably helpless and vulnerable. They have felt the full brunt of this thing. In the loss of friends, a terrible reminder of the danger of their work, and now, to add more cruelty, economic forces that seem to threaten their jobs and the entire industry.

I reached for words. I told them that they were our neighbors, our airline in Chicago that had taken us where we needed to go and brought us safely home. I told them we were grateful for them and proud of them, that God loved their friends who died and that God loved them too.

There were eighteen candles on the high altar at Holy Name. As a Pentecostal choir sang a stirring version of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," eighteen flight attendants and pilots lined up at the altar and each lighted a candle to honor a dear dead colleague. We sang "America the Beautiful" and "Amazing Grace." My good friend Father Bob McLaughlin led us in a prayer and sent us out into the world in peace. I was drained, tired, weary, and a little discouraged at my own inadequacy to find the words to help.

And then walking up State Street, with my pulpit robe over my arm and a clerical collar on, I was spotted by a street person singing "Take Me out to the Ball Game" at the top of his lungs. They look for clerical collars—we're easy—and I saw him coming and reached for my wallet. "Father," he said (that's what happens when you wear a clerical collar on State Street), "Father, there's one God, right?" "Well, yes, there is one God," I responded, thinking "This is really going to be an expensive one." "So if there's only one God, then we're all sort of the same, right?" And I had to agree with that too. And then he said, "Cheer up, Father, we're all going to be okay." And he did the most extraordinary thing, like an Olympic athlete or like the Cubs relief pitcher Flash Gordon, who, when he gets the final out and nails down the win, raises his arm and points an index finger

straight up to the heavens. It's an act of defiant hope, after a moment of extreme vulnerability. And I joined him, pointing up to the heavens. He said it again: "We're going to be okay, Father."

We believe that God, the sovereign Lord of history, is out in front of us, summoning us.

We dare to believe that even when we face uncertainty, danger, and fear, it is an act of faithfulness and defiant hope to lift our eyes and look up to the future to which God calls us.

"We're going to be okay."

Our God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.

Amen.